

# **Second Thoughts Connecticut**

## **Advocates against the legalization of assisted suicide**

Testimony supporting the full restoration of state funding of Independent Living Centers  
(Department of Rehabilitation Services) for FY 2016 –2017  
HB 6824, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2017

Senator Bye, Rep. Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Stephen Mendelsohn. I am one of the leaders of Second Thoughts Connecticut, a grassroots organization which advocates against the legalization of assisted suicide from a disability rights perspective. I am also an autistic adult. Due to this hearing being on Friday evening, which for me is Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, I am unable to testify in person. I do wish to add our voices here at Second Thoughts Connecticut to the many others in the disability community who will be testifying in strong opposition to the line item in the budget of the Department of Rehabilitation Services which eliminates all funding for Connecticut's five Centers for Independent Living.

Connecticut's five Centers for Independent Living provide critical services that enable people with disabilities to live independently in the community rather than in expensive and restrictive institutions. They are invariably led by people with disabilities who have first-hand experience dealing with the numerous barriers, attitudinal as well as physical, that still keep far too many of us from living up to our full potential as productive citizens. Other speakers will be informing you of the specific services that Connecticut's CILs provide, from information referral, advocacy, training, and peer support to helping transition hundreds of people every year out of institutions through our state's Money Follows the Person program, and much more.

From a purely fiscal perspective, elimination—or even reduction—of state funding for Connecticut's CIL's is a classic case of being penny wise and pound foolish. By enabling people with disabilities to leave expensive institutions, gain employment, and become productive, taxpaying citizens, CILs save the roughly half million dollars they are receiving from the state many times over. They are a wise and productive investment of our tax dollars.

While it is important to get Connecticut's fiscal house in order, we should not look at CIL funding in purely economic terms. People's lives are at stake here—literally. Many of us see a war on people with disabilities in Connecticut. Funding for many other critical services for people with disabilities is being slashed as well, to the point where the budget is being balanced on our backs. Before cutting our home care and attendant care we need to survive, perhaps you should consider eliminating corporate welfare.

Added to these budget cuts is the threat of legalized assisted suicide from a bill now before the Judiciary Committee. A prescription of lethal barbiturates used to cost a mere \$100-300, before European drug manufacturers stopped selling pentobarbital to the US because they opposed use of the drug for capital punishment. A recent news story about former New Orleans Saints safety Steve Gleason, who has ALS, noted the cost of living for someone with

his disability is about \$250,000 (Steve Gleason hospitalized but 'doing better,' set to return home, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, <http://s.nola.com/gMC56QF>) The combination of assisted suicide with service cuts and medical cost cutting is a deadly mix that pressures people with disabilities to give up and die. It sends the false and dangerous message that we are a burden on society.

As one of our members, Elaine Kolb, asks in her song, “Not Dead Yet,” the disability-rights battle cry against assisted suicide, “When you take away our services, we don’t know how we’ll survive; Since death is cost-effective, do you want us dead or alive? She continues, “When you take away the things we need, we don’t know how we will cope; When you cut our means of security, you take away our hope.” [http://youtu.be/GmBi1zt6M\\_M](http://youtu.be/GmBi1zt6M_M)

This issue relates to the importance of fully funding CILs. In Oregon, where assisted suicide has been legal for a number of years, that state’s own statistics show that people are requesting “aid in dying” because of disability-phobic attitudes, not because they are in pain. From 1998-2014, only 24.7% of those requesting assistance to die under Oregon’s Death with Dignity Act did so because of “inadequate pain control or concern about it.” In contrast, a stunning 91.5% cited “a steady loss of autonomy,” 88.7% stated that they were “less able to engage in activities making life enjoyable,” and 79.3% feared a “loss of dignity.” <http://public.health.oregon.gov/ProviderPartnerResources/EvaluationResearch/DeathwithDignityAct/Documents/year17.pdf>

**These are disability issues. These are issues that CILs address in their daily work.** People with severe disabilities—including members of Second Thoughts Connecticut—have shown that one can have autonomy and dignity even with limited (and often declining) physical abilities. In Oregon, Washington, and now Vermont, people are killing themselves, with doctors’ assistance, because they do not have the perspective and resources that CILs offer.

They are also killing themselves because Oregon has made a public policy choice to deny people like Barbara Wagner and Randy Stroup potentially lifesaving chemotherapy under that state’s health plan, but will pay the roughly \$100 for suicide pills. Oregon has sent a clear message that people with severe disabilities, especially those whom doctors view as having poor prognoses (often erroneously), are too costly for the state and would be better off dead.

What message will Connecticut send? Will we go down the same path as Oregon, Washington, and Vermont, and foreign countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, which have gone even further toward euthanasia, and send the message that disability is a fate worse than death? Or are we better than that? And if we are better than that, and I hope we are, then we need to start supporting those services, like self-directed attendant care and other independent living services, which enable people with disabilities to live with autonomy and dignity. Restoring funding for Connecticut’s five Centers for Independent Living would be a first step in sending the right message that people with disabilities, even severe disabilities, are fully valued in our state.

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